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Interview with Anderson Childress (FA 98)

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TAPE TRANSCRIPTION Tape 1 Side 1

JM John Marshall
JS Judith Schottenfeld
AC Anderson Childress

Interview with Anderson Childress (b.1928 Dog Creek, below Cub Run, Hart Co., Ky.) of Route 2, Box 325, Munfordville, Ky. Interviewed on September 23, 1977 by John Marshall and Judith Schottenfeld.

(starts with history of Childress family, not directly related to basket making)

AC Would you like to know a little bit about the Childress family in Hart Co., I mean starting back from the beginning?

JM Yeah, especially as it relates to basketmaking. I imagine it does anyway.

AC Not particularly basket-making but apparently they promoted the art by peddling then and selling. They probably were the first to do that. IA III

(irrelevant family history to 166)

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JS These people still aren't making baskets yet? (1825)

AC No apparently not, because, maybe a few, because they couldn't have been making very many because there wasn't any market for them. There wasn't even any roads hardly in the country to have gotten them out. They may have sent a few down river by flatboat maybe to New Orleans, that was their market for tobacco and hemp and corn and bacon. IA III

JM What year are you talking about now?

AC This is the period, say 1830-1850. Along in there.

JM Now which river would they flatboat down?

AC Mostly the Green River.

JM Green River to the Ohio to the Mississippi and down?

AC In local tradition they say they built rafts with logs and also flatboats on the Nolin River. I know that there was a mill on Nolin River at Dickey's Mill. That was just above where the dam is now. I can't imagine how they got a flatboat over that dam except in extremely high water.

JM It's an earthen dam?

AC No it was a plank dam, the traditional mill dam. I'm not sure. I know there was a mill there as early 1818, 1819, maybe earlier than that. (to 191).

AC The fourth one (son of John W. and Mary Childress) was Thomas Morrison, he married Mary Carter. It was his first son, Elijah Thomas, who was the famous basket peddler. Nearly all of his sons, except Bill Morrison, his second son. I have no record he ever peddled baskets. He died at a fairly early age. IC III

JM What year was Elijah Thomas born?

Ac I have here. I took it from one census record, he was born in 1863, died in 1946. Now I have found another place where he was born in 1864. So he was born in either 1863 or 64.

JS When do you first remember the stories of Elijah Tom, he's almost like a legendary figure? When do you think those stories would have begun?

AC I guess Lijah Tom began. See, all he did all his life was trade, from a very young age, probably 18, 19, 20. He never farmed, you know, he never attempted to make a living solely by farming. He liked to fool with country stores, however he didn't want to stay in a store, he just couldn't be confined to anything that...

IA,C

JS He had a reputation right at the very beginning for somebody...

AC Yeah, trading. He'd swap pocket knives. It was a passion with him like gambling or something. The earliest record of his storekeeping would go back to about 1880 or something like that.

JM He actually kept a store?

AC For awhile, at the time. Just long enough to build up an inventory of cheap goods that he could get rid of and trade or something, then he'd go buy another one. He couldn't make anything, really, out of a store then. Oh they could. They took in baskets, all these country stores did around Cub Run in later years..Oh they'd give you 15¢ or 20¢ per basket on groceries you bought. If you sold them outright they wouldn't hardly give you anything couse there wasn't any money in circulation much.

IIIA

(to 257) irrelevant family history to 260)

AC Then the sixth child was Benjamin Franklin (b. 1847). Now if there was a first Childress who started peddling baskets, it was probably Ben, that would have been Elijah Thomas' uncle. We'll go into him a little further in a minute.

IA, C

(to 266) family history to 277

AC I guess that Uncle Ben, he was the first one to get out of the neighborhood and travel around.

IIB

JM You think he was the first Childress to travel?

AC Uh huh.

JM You think he was the first person to...

AC First peddler

JM You think he was the first peddler?

JS You think he peddled other things besides baskets?

AC I think he started out probably peddling grindstones about the end of the Civil War or maybe during Civil War days, possibly before the Civil War. There was a sandstone quarry on my great-grandfather Childress' old farm down at Old Maple, below Cub Run. They found that it was perfect grit for grindstones, made ideal grindstones, and some of them, now I'm not sure who did this, I think Tom Morrison..maybe he was the best, all of them were masons incidentally, or stone masons, not Free-masons. They were pretty good workmen in stone. My great-grandfather also built chimneys and worked in stone. But anyway one of them perfected a device to cut out these grindstones by mule power with a sweep, you know mule walked around in a circle.

JM Like a cane mill?

AC Uh huh. They turned this stone and they used chisels or some sort of cutters and water. They could make a couple or three a day. It didn't take long to fill the needs of the community so they had excess grindstones, so Uncle Ben apparently was the first one who took them out to sell. Now I've heard my father talk about when he was very small, Uncle Ben had been to the Shaker Village sown at Auburn. It seems to me he must, have been on one of his peddling, trading trips with a wagon and team. It didn't take many grindstones to make a wagon load. And I've heard Dad say in later years after they started peddling baskets they would always put a few grindstones in with the little baskets, baskets were light you know. There wasn't any real weight with them so they could sell some grindstones on the side too. So I would imagine that Uncle Ben probably was the inspiration for Elijah Thomas to be a peddler. Uncle Ben was also a Baptist preacher and he too didn't farm. He just wandered around over the country, he would preach some. He just liked to travel and he also kept a store. And at one time incidentally he was the founder of the Roseburg Post Office (below Cub Run toward Nolin, down 88) So he had a store there at Roseburg, Uncle Ben did, the Post Office had probably already been established at Cub Run. It was established there in 1874. Cub Run, indidentally was known as Crossroads before the Post Office was established and all the old people always called it Crossroads. They never said Cub Run.

IIIA IIIA IA IC

JM Did they build the existing highways right on the old roads?

AC More or less (irrelevant conversation from 336 to 428)
(most of the Childresses lived, died and were buried between Cub Run and Nolin, except Uncle Ben who moved to Missouri and is buried there)

(discussion of carefree attitudes of his great-uncles because of Irish ancestry)

AC Now Elijah Thomas, Tom Morrison's son, seems to have been the most ambitious of the bunch. At various times in his life he was probably fairly well off. Of course, trading, I guess, is sort of like gambling, he would lose a lot of money course he made some too, the luck went sort of like gambling.

IIIA

JM Now that we're back on Lige Thomas, let me ask you, who you thought first brought the basket-making into the area, where do you think it came from, why do you think that? IA

AC I have no knowledge, except what some writers have written back in the 20's and 30's and they were people who had first hand information from older people in the community, and it seems to be a consensus of opinion that the Jaggers brought the art to Hart Co., at least they were the most prominent of the basketmaking families.

JS Do they talk about where they brought it from?

AC The Jaggers family, I think came from South Carolina, at least according to the census records, even though a few indicated they were born in Virginia

JS As far as you know were they already making baskets before they came here, or was this something they learned?

AC If they were making baskets it was an art that was handed down from father to son or mother to daughter, but there couldn't have been any market for them unless, as I said awhile ago, they shipped a few with their produce down river that was pre 1850...

JM Could have been just for use though.

AC Yeah, a community thing and an art that they loved to make them or something...

JS But we have no way of telling for how long the baskets were made just in the house before a market was created.

AC No nothing definite. The only definite thing, the earliest date, any concrete information, this is Dr. R.C. Crandon's journal, who was the first doctor at Cub Run and on April 8, 1885, he took on a store account by one basket credit 25¢ of Willie Waddell, that's Curtie's daddy. IA

JM Where did you get that?

AC This is from the journal itself. I copied this thing, worked all winter on it. (journal is in possession of the Johnson family of Wax)

end of side one, begin side 2

AC Incidentally this Willie Waddell, his mother was a Jaggers so evidently he learned the art from her. It always goes back to the Jaggers.

JS How many families of Jaggers are there? We mentioned last time that Willie Logsdon's wife is a Jaggers and you said that was another Jaggers family. How many different families are we talking about?

AC I have no idea. These are the first ones this will. (see appendix) (discussion of Jaggers families as listed in Dr's journal) to 80

JM Where do you think that the people learned how to make baskets to begin with?

AC I don't know. I have an idea if the Jaggers family did bring the art to Hart Co., and I have no doubt that they did, I'm inclined to agree with that theory.

JS Do you think they were calling it an art then or do you think that's the word we use now? Do you think they thought of it as art?

AC No, they didn't think of it just as a means to carry their corn in or something. What I was startin to say was they came from South Carolina, I'm sure they did, I doubt if that they fround any white oak out there so they probably used willow reeds or whatever that would weave into baskets, rushes. They used willow reeds or some other native growth. But after they came to Ky., There was an abundance of white oak. This country here was literally full of white oak and still is where there's any virgin timber. So somehow they discovered you could make splits out of the white, the outside layer of the white oak and they already knew the art of weaving so...

JM Where do you think they laearned that?

AC It probably was handed down from maybe even came with them from Scotland, they may have been weavers by trade, even over there. The art, really, is not that difficult anybody with a little patience and manual dexterity can weave.

JS There isn't a basket tradition in Scotland.

AC Weaving is. Weaving of cloth and weaving of basket-, of course, are not the same art, but manual dexterity plays a great part in each so..

JM The Indians in South Carolina were weaving baskets.

AC Yeah, they could have stole the art from them..We never know.

JM Who was the best known of the earliest basket makers?

AC Well, during my lifetime. I can't go any further back than my own personal recollection on that.

JM You never heard your father talk about...?

AC He would mention a few, some of the Jaggers and I can't remember any first names to save my life, but usually when you'd speak of the Jaggers family, or some of them, now all of them weren't basketmakers, but when they would speak of them they'd always insert something about the other basketmakers or something like that.

JM How did he say that? Was it in a derogatory manner?

AC It just depended. Sometimes it was and sometines it wasn't.

JS Anderson, when your father would talk about the basketmakers, like if you were to say someone was a good basketmaker, what was he meaning when he was saying that? Did he mean they were fast...?

AC They would turn out a lot of baskets.

JS OK. Do you think he meant more than just the fact that they were fast?

AC No. If he was referring to a good basketmaker he only, he just meant they could turn out a lot of baskets. Didn't necessarily mean they were good people or good managers or...

JM Or good baskets.

AC You see after they found a market for them and they got them out of the country. These peddlers they didn't really care how rough they were. They would sell anyway..Course a better basket would sell for more money, but they didn't pay much for them to start with, I think they paid 15¢ or 20¢ in the stores around, or in trade for a basket that would bring $1 or $1.25 out on the road

JS You think the idea was to make as many as you could..

AC Yeah, mass production

JM In your own lifetime, what's the best (basketmaker), in your lifetime..

AC Well, Dad had a half-sister who married Uncle Ben Waddell and he was several years older than her. I can remember Uncle Ben. I well remember Aunt Mandy, Amanda was her name. I was about 12-15 years old when she died. And they make baskets, that was the only income that they had. They make a lot of them. My brother over here has two old bushel baskets Uncle Ben made. They've been reworked since but, he could make two or three bushel baskets a day.

JM Were they good?

AC Yeah they were good, strong, rough baskets. They were farm baskets. They weren't made to be pretty, or neat or anything. They were made to carry corn from the crib out to the hog lot in.

JS Do you know whether he made the who basket from beginning to end or whether he would do part of it and give it to somebody else to...

A C Well now his wife, he did all the hard work like bending the hoops, shaving and bending the hoops, getting the timber. And he evidently started this at a very early age. Aunt Mandy was about 16 years old when she married him, they never had any children. It was just the two of them. She wasn't able to do anything that required walking or anything like that. She was sort of disabled and he would get the timber, shave the hoops and him and her would make the splits. He would do the rough work like starting to put the main ribs. You know how they're made I'm sure.

JS Well, why don't you tell us?

AC Well, in a minute. I'll go ahead. And then she would weave the splits in which was lighter work. And then in later years after

AC a market developed and they could get a little more money for them, why she made nice baskets, decorative type flower baskets, but all made on the Kentucky pattern, they called it, the Kentucky style with the hoops and the ribs and all that hard work

III IVB

JM Explain in detail, then, what you call the Kentucky pattern, Kentucky style. I haven't heard that phrase before.

AC First they would make these hoops out of hickory, they would shave out a piece of timber about 1½ inches thick, a lath in other words. While it was green, they would bend it. They would cut little notches in two places where it met? and they would wrap them with a real fine split to hold the circle. Sometimes they would make a whole bunch of hoops...

II C ↓

JS What would they call it, where it held together.

AC The splice, where the hoop spliced, they would cut a little notch there and wrap it with splits to hold the hoop together. Now they would do these things in a methodical fashion. When they'd make hoops, they'd make a bunch of hoops, and there was a certain circumference for a bushel basket. The hoop was a particular circumference and egg basket, half-bushel basket. I don't remember I used to know...

JM How did they measure that?

AC I don't know whether they used a tape measure or just went and measured the basket with a string.

JM Or length of the arm, distance from the ground...

II C ↓

AC Yeah, something like that. But when they would get a bunch of these made, they would put the two hoops together. I'm not a very good artist, but anyway it looked like this. One hoop went like this and the other hoop would sit inside and crossed it. Then in these crosses here they'd put about four small nails to hold it together and make it sturdy so this hoop wouldn't pull up past this other. Then they wrapped this, they called this the bind, I think, here around the hoops, they wrapped that with splits. Made it look something like that. I'll draw it a little bigger. This is an exaggerated drawing anyway. And then they shaved these ribs, the pieces went out here, they put in the primary ribs, or the main ribs first. Looked something like this. Remember these are oval. You're just looking at one side of the basket.

JS Do you know how many they used?

AC It was an odd number. I can't remember--7, 9 or something like that..

JS It had to be an odd number?

AC I think so. And then they started weaving. Incidentally they put this tie on this hoop at the bottom of the basket.

II C

JM Is that the splice you're talking about?

AC Yeah, the splice, and the other one they put it over here to the side somewhere, put it anywhere as long as it didn't interfere with where they joined together. Then they started weaving in here, and after they got out, something like that with their splits, then they whittled another rib and they inserted it in these splits here, between each of these. Then they could go agead and finish the basket. Now for fancy baskets, they would also whittle a small rib that went around this handle like this. A cross-section of it would look like this. Here would be the handle, and here would be the rib. Then they wove that like that to make it decorative, you know all the way around the handle, it looked something like that, when it got done. But they didn't use that on the old, cheap feed baskets, that was for special baskets--lunch baskets or something they wanted to make pretty.

IV B

IV A

IV C

JM Lunch baskets did you say?

AC Yeah, the kids all carried their lunch to school...

JS Did they put lids on these...?

AC Yeah, the lunch baskets they did, and they also made a picnic basket that was a long shape like this.

JM When was the first time you ever saw a picnic basket? Did you ever hear your father talk about picnic baskets?

IV A

IV C

AC No, I can't recall him talking about any particular kind of basket. They always referred to them as the Kentucky style of basket and I guess that most of the baskets that the early peddlers took out were like this--peck, half-bushel and bushel size. The bushel size sold really better because they were functional, could carry feed in them. The peck basket made a good egg basket, used to carry the eggs to the store in. And then later on, I guess in the twenties, was when the picnic basket may have started, or the turn of the century or something like that. They were a little fancy, they...And...

↓

JS Were they round or square?

AC They were..some of them looked something like this from the top view, you know a long oval, or not really an oval, the corners were just rounded off. They were very hard to make. Aunt Mandy made them, that's the only person that...Now my mother never made those kind of baskets, she made fast sellers, fast to make.

I C

IV A

JS Do you think if someone went to the trouble of making one of these special baskets, they'd get more money for them?

AC Yeah.

III

JS Do you have any idea how much more?

III A
II D

AC I really don't. Now these sold better after...to the tourist trade. There were thousands of basket stands up and down 31W in the twenties and thirties, late twenties, on through the thirties, up into the forties. Somehow, somebody discovered the art of dying these baskets. Now I think baskets were probably, splits you know, dyed various colors in them. I don't know what they first used, but after Putnam dyes came out, that was what everybody used. It was simple and fast. Course there was still an art to that. If they didn't use the right solution to set the color in the wood, when it rained on them it would run all over the place. My mother, she had two old cast iron pots she dyed her splits in and one of those solutions was salt water, and she kept it, she used the salt water to set the dye. It was nearly permanent, it would hardly come out. Sunlight would fade it, but water wouldn't have much effect on it.

JM Do you remember why she decided to dye those splits?

AC Well, they were already...see she didn't start making baskets till the thirties, and they were already dying splits, all these bushel baskets were...

JS Did she get more money for these?

III
IV

AC Not really. I think the basket peddlers wanted them pretty, made the wagons look good, I guess, as they went down the road, more than anything else. I doubt it would help sell them, it may have.

JM But she didn't do it just because she liked it better, because the peddlers wanted it...

AC Yeah, the people that bought them, they liked all sorts of colors--bright colors, black and red and gaudy colors.

II B

JS Do you know where they got the tools they used to make the baskets?

AC The knives, most of them were the old Barlow knives. I understand that the first Russell Barlow, the blades coame from England and the handles weree put on them here in America. I think that's right.

JM When would that have been?

AC They started before the turn of the century, probably about the end of the Civil War. But most of the basketmakers used the old Barlow knife, and they cost from 10¢ to 15¢.

JS Do you know if there are any of those around anymore?

AC None of the originals. If you find one, they're very expensive.

JM About how much?

AC Gosh, I don't know, if its in mint condition it'd probably bring $100 or more.

JM Do you know anyone who has a Russell Barlow knife?

II B ↓

AC I don't believe I do. My brother trades knives but he doesn't have one...of course the the froe. I'll draw you a picture of a froe.

JS Spell that for me.

AC F_R_O, it's also spelled F_R_O_W. That don't look right.

JM Explain what you're doing as you're going so we can get that on tape.

337

SC Well it's a long blade with a hoe (hole?), a band type thing on the back end of it at tight angles to the blade, and in it was inserted a wooden handle. That's something of the way it looked. Something like a hoe with the blade turned at right angles to what a how would ordinarily be. This handle is...

JS Are these still around?

AC Yeah I've got one somewhere. I don't know where it is. This handle is about.....long. The handles made (big?) of wood so you can put pressure on it and you start it through the...

JM Tell me how big that is.

AC Oh about a foot long. This blade here is approximately 12" and this handle would be about 14"-16".

JM Now tell us what that was used for.

II C ↓

AC That was used to split the timber out with. Maybe I am going to be an artist after all, look here. See the first cut you split it in half, and then you quarter it...

JS Wait a minute. Would this timber already be cut? Cut to the length of the hoops?

AC Yeah, well there wasn't any particular length.

JS Is this the wood for the hoops or...

AC This is for the hoops or splits or whatever.

JS Would I be standing up when I was doing this? How would I use it?

AC Let me show you how you would use it. They would have a fork of a tree..

JM Have you done this Anderson?

AC Yeah. There's various ways to hold your timber, but you'd cut a fork of a tree and you'd lay this end up on a block of wood or something. Put it up about knee high, you know, comfortable working keight, and drive two stakes down through it like this, to hold the other end so you can prize on it and then you run your timber down

II B, C ↓

AC through here and it sticks out under this, and this gives you a purchase, or whatever, I'm not that much of a mechanical engineer, to prize on----and you put your froe in here. This is the froe, and you drive it with a mallet from the top. And you just keep working it down your cut of timber until you split it.

JS What do you call that? Is that called splitting the timber?

AC This thing, the forked log, was called the break. I suppose there wer e...you could also use two logs, you could fix th em something like this where you could put your timber in here, but this was the most practical way because it was easy to find a fork, just stake it down on one end and lay the other on...

JS If you were going to go do this to your timber and your wife was in the house, what would you say to her--I'm going to..

AC Cut some basket timber. But that would be going to the woods to get it, when you brought it in, you'd split it first you'd...

JM Wait, can we stay in the woods for a second? When would you go to the woods? II A

AC Any time of the year. Anytime you ran out of basket timber. You didn't have to wait on the sap or seasons or whatever.

JS If you had a choice, when would the time when you most likely would be going to the woods? V A

AC Well. I can't relate that question to basketmakers because basketmakers didn't do much of anything else. They didn't worry about farm work. If they farmed, it was secondary, basketmaking was their primary vocation.

JM It didn't matter what sort of day, what time of year, you got basket timber? II A ↓

AC No, it didn't matter.

JM There was nothing about the seasons, nothing about the...

AC Well, let's qualify that. You couldn't get out when the timber was frozen in the winter and cut it and another thing, you couldn't get on hand too much white oak timber at one time, only what you could make up in splits within a relatively short period of time because you have to do it while it's green. Once it seasons you can't work it, it's got to...

JS You couldn't soak it or... II C

AC No it doesn't work. However, once you get the splits made, you can let them dry and you can soak them, then you can use them. They always did. They always had a pile of splits.

II A, C

JS OK, but the splits are the only part that you can...

AC But to the timber itself, you have to make it up while it's fresh from the stump, so to speak.

JM While we're still in the woods, how did you separate that tree from the ground?

II B

AC With an axe. What they would do...I guess in the early days, the landowners, most of them owned some land, they would soon use up what timber...you see only a certain type of white oak makes splits

II A

JS What kind of white oak?

AC The best timber is first growth, that is virgin timber and they would get, they're never more thatn 6"-8" in diameter. Not all of it would make splits, some of it had bird pecks, where sap suckers, or whatever had pecked through the cambian layer and the bark would grow over them, and you don't know that until you split it, that makes dark imperfections in the grains of wood. But, they were experts at that.

JS You know how to do this don't you?

AC I'm not a very good hand at picking good basket timber. Here (drawing) is a diameter of the tree, of course the bark is around the outside, outer edge of it, and there's only a thin, white layer in most trees--some of it has more white than others. This is the white part, the fleshy bit, right under the bark, the sap layer...

JM That's the good layer, huh?

AC Yeah, the rest of that has to be thrown away unless it, it hardly ever will split--sometimes it will but seldom ever. This is the red wood in here. Now the grain of this is running this way. In splitting grain, this is what they call board, if you were going to split it for boards, you would split it with this grain.

JM That's from the inside of the tree right to the outside.

AC Yeah. Now, when they'd split it up, sometimes they'd do this in the woods so they wouldn't have so much to carry home, they nearly always carried it home. They hardly ever took a wagon or a sled. They'd just go out and cut four or five sticks a day, you know, make it up with an axe and take most of this heart out, which would leave a,... something like that...what they would do, they would split it into quarters so they wouldn't have so much to carry.

JM What did they do with that center bit.

AC Just throw it away.

JM Why didn't they burn it?

AC They didn't have any use for it. It was out in the woods and the wood yard was at home. They were practical.

JS How old is this tree?

II A

AC They were young trees. They would average in diameter...sometimes a four inch tree would have about 1½" white on it and sometimes an eight inch tree won't have anymore white.

JM How old is a 6" or 8" diameter tree?

AC Fifteen or twenty years old, I guess.

II B

JS That's a young tree?

AC Yeah, a very young tree. So when they got this home they would split this like this, again this outside layer in sections, quarter sections look something like this. They could take it in the house then and make splits. Here's the bark out here and if its too wide for a split that way, they'd split it again. The splits come off in this fashion, not with this coarse grain, but...

JM Against the grain..

AC Yeah. The old timers would say you split a log board fashion, that's with the grain or bastard fashion, which is against the grain. That was the terminology for splitting...

JM Would the basketmakers use that phrase--splitting it bastard fashion?

AC Yeah

JM All right. You know you said that they'd use a Barlow knife for...

AC Yeah we got to the hoops, we used the froe, then they used a shaving horse, some of them had shaving horses, nearly all of them did. Have you seen a shaving horse?

JM Yeah, go ahead and describe one.

AC Well they were made in different ways. Usually it was a board with a clamp-type device on it here, a pin through here...

JM How long was the board?

AC About 6'-8'. Some of them you just put your knee against that and hold it, and some of them just used a board to lay their hoop on, there was a hoop going out here, then they shaved it with a draw knife. Draw knife looked something like this. I'm sure you've seen those too.

II B

JM Yeah, it has two handles on it and you just pull the knife across the board.

A C And that's about all the tools they needed except for some kind of hammer to drive those four or five nails into the slots of the hoops, where the hoops went together.

JM You mentioned the Barlow knife, that's a brand, a type of knife. Did they have a particular brand that they liked in any of these other things? Or did they make those implements themselves?

AC These were nearly all. (made by blacksmiths)

JM They were the ones who made it? The individual person--the farmer, the basketmaker--didn't make his own tools?

AC No.

JS What about the tool that punched the holes...

AC Oh yeah, I forgot one other tool. they used--an awl. They'd usually make them themselves. They'd just simply drive a nail in a block of wood and sharpen it off with a file and they'd have an awl.

JS When they were makeing the baskets and they were sharing the work, were any of the tools private tools?

AC Yeah all craftsmen (have private tools). I don't even like somebody to use my hammer.

JS Would they share the awl?

AC Probably, that wasn't used too much. It's not a very delicate tool anyway.

JS They had to use it to put the ribs in, so it was important.

AC Yeah, it was important.

JS But you'd pass it to whoever needed it?

AC Yeah, but they were easily made. They'd usually have several of them around the household.

JS The knife was private? The knife was something that you wouldn't share?

AC Yeah, more than likely you wouldn't. Some people with large hands--women liked the small Barlow knife, their hands weren't so large of course...

JM Did they have a special name for that knife?

AC Just an old Barlow knife, or basket knife, or whatever. They wouldn't want to peel apples with it, 'cause they kept them extremely sharp.

JS Did they have one blade?

AC Yeah, one blade because another blade would blister your hand, too much handle there. But some of them liked the hunting (knife). They called them the Daddy Barlow. You know the long, about a four inch, or 3¾ inch blade, hunting type knife. My mother used one of them for years and years.

IIB

JM Is that sometimes called a Grandfather Barlow?

AC Yeah, or Daddy Barlow.

JS They're the same thing?

AC Yeah

JS I want to know about that business of basketmakers only making baskets as opposed to people that were farming and making baskets..

IA

III 3

AC I think there were a few families, you couldn't call them shiftless because basketmaking was extremely hard work, I mean if you worked at it all the time, but I think their primary failing was they were poor managers or they lived from hand to mouth and too, they had big families. They started out in a sort of deprived condition and they never could get themselves in any better shape. They had no other means of keeping body and soul together except to make baskets, which was a pretty poor living 'cause the merchants would just about beat them out of them. You can imagine now working all day for 75¢, maybe a whole family working not making any more than that.

JS How many of these families that just made baskets do you think there were? Do you think it was the exception or the rule?

AC I couldn't even hazard a guess. I can show you an example. This area through here--say from where I'm at..

Geography

IB

JM You call this the Pine Grove Community don't you?

AC No, this is Sandhills.

JM Where's the Pine Grove Community?

AC That was where I was raised down below Cub Run. But this area through here, there was possibly 500-600 families living between here and Cub Run, in these sandhills. Now the land was fertile, when it was first cleared, but it was sandy and it was rolling land and soon wore out. So they could just barely make enough corn to feed their livestock and tobacco wasn't worth anything. Of course we're talking about a period now, after the Civil War--Reconstruction.

JS There were 500-600 families?

AC Yeah, between here and Cub Run.

JS Of those 500-600 families, how many people do you think were involved in any kind of basketmaking?

AC Half of them.

JS And of that half how many were making baskets full time?

AC I'd say another half, at least, 'cause there wasn't any other way to exist.

JM That'd be about 125 families. That's around the turn of the century.

JS Making just baskets, not farming.

AC Yeah. You see poor families, large families...

JS What's a large family?

AC Well the average family then was 6 or 8 children, they'd run from that on up to 15 or 16 children. One family this side of Cub Run had 20...22.

JM What family was that?

AC Logsdin, Tad Logsdin's family had 22 by two wives. So you can imagine how hard it was to feed that many when tobacco was bringing at the best 10¢ a pound. Sometimes it wouldn't pay the floor expenses for selling it.

JM 10¢ a pound compared to 10¢ a basket makes it sound like making baskets was a better proposition.

AC Yeah it was a good proposition.

JS Would you say that the people, you know the way we're describing the families who made them full time because they didn't have another other...call it talent or any other way...would you say..

AC No I wouldn't say that, they had other talents they...

JS You think there were circumstances...

AC Yeah circumstances was what brought it about, the economic conditions of the country and...These people, by and large, were very intelligent people. In fact there's more educators, more men prominent in education, politics from this poverty-stricken area down there than any other one area I guess you could find anywhere on a per capita, percentage, per capita basis.

JS None of the people we've talked to so far has said they made only baskets. Everybody has said they made baskets whenever they had time. They'd do it when they can...

AC Some of them did. We're talking about the basketmakers...I guess you could say there would be at least two different classes of basketmakers.

JS Are there any people around now that we've discussed, anybody you know that was the class that just made baskets?

IC

AC Uncle Ben and Aunt Mandy were two that I told you about awhile ago. And Willie Waddess, Curty's daddy, that's all he ever did, just make baskets.

JS Anybody around today?

AC No, nobody that I know of. The only basketmakers that I know of, she may be dead, over in Grayson Co., Alvey. There was another family that came from Hart Co., that moved over there Louis Jaggers and his family, they made baskets solely for a living.

JM Are any of them still alive?

AC I don't believe so. Louis may be, but he would be in his nineties.

V A 1 and 2

JM Jumping backwards a bit. You were talking about two classes of basketmakers..What sort of attitudes did one class have to the other? And what sort of attitudes did the rest of the people who didn't make baskets have to the basketmakers? What sort of attitude did the storekeeper have to the people who made baskets?

AC To answer your last one first, the storekeeper encouraged basket-making because they could make money out of it.

III A 3. 4.

JM Explain the process for me...somebody made a basket...

AC O.K. Say, for instance, coffee's 10¢ a pound. I remember when it was 15¢ a lb. when I was a kid. That's unbelievable isn't it? Anyway...they probably sold that coffee for 10¢ a lb., they probably got for about 8¢ a lb., maybe 6¢, 7¢, something like that. On the baskets they took in trade at the store, they probably made a 200% profit on each dollar of produce they exchanged for baskets.

JS Would you bring them in every day? Or would you wait?

AC No. They would... like Cub Run, or Crossroads before, it was a trading center and they would come in there on Saturdays, the people would do their shopping, but their coffee. They didn't have to buy much. We talked a while ago about the basketmakers who didn't farm, we'll have to qualify that too, they didn't depend on farming for an income, but nearly without an exception they raised corn or they raised a garden for their own use and they raised a lot, nearly all, of what they ate, so about all

IC IA

AC they had to buy was coffee, sugar, kerosene for their lights, soda, calico. You'd be surprised on how little clothing they could get by on, because the men would wear a new pair of overalls to church on Sunday, they were dressed up, and the women would wear a new calico, or print, dress two or three times a year. I don't know much about dress goods. Any way, they could live on very little. Back to your question, what did the non-basketmakers think of the basketmakers, I don't think you could say, by and large they looked down on them, some of them did. Some people weren't charitable towards other people, and they still aren't.

IA 2

III 3

JM Can you give me a specific example without offending anyone?

AC Not really. I couldn't...Maybe it was an attitude that grew up as something that you really can't put your finger on. Maybe the reason some of them looked down on the basketmakers, they weren't very good managers. They didn't improve themselves much. They never had much money, they never added much to the community, in a way, they weren't in politics. They were tyring to make an honorable living, there wasn't any welfare, if there had of been, they wouldn't have asked for a bit of it because they were proud people. They didn't want help. They were too involved in taking care of themselves to ask for help from anybody else. Some of the, most of them I guess, were really poor managers. They lived sort of from hand to mouth, from one week to the next, from one Saturday to the next. Of course, their parents had lived that way, and their parents before them had lived that way. And another thing, they were sort of being dragged into the twentieth century by their hair. They were anachronisms. Their people came here, most of them, nearly all of them, when with very little work you could live. All they had to do was raise a little patch of corn for their bread and they depended chiefly on hunting for their meat. They could run their hogs outside, there wasn't any stock law until about 1912, and all the animals would run outside. The hogs fattened themselves on nuts in the forest, beech-nuts and chestnuts. This country here was full of chestnuts. So these people were trying to live, I guess, like their forebears lived. They just weren't going to live in the twentieth century, or even in the nineteenth century, they were living in the eighteenth century. They didn't like change, they didn't even, a lot of them, I guess the majority of the poor people didn't even care about sending their children to school. They figured if their grandfather never went to school, he probably had a bunch of slaves-maybe two or three .., they didn't see why their children should have an education. That was their attitude. It began to change after the turn of the twentieth century.

IA 2.

JM What about the attitude of the basketmakers who made baskets part time to the ones who made them full time?

JS Also did the basketmakers know that people felt this way about them?

AC Yeah, but I don't think they really cared. They were too busy...

JS Oh, you think they were aware of it?

AC Yeah I think so. I don't know that there's a group of people living today that you could compare them to, The people in Hart Co., in this area down here, at the turn of the century. I really don't.

JM In what way?

AC Well, they could have cared less what other people thought about them. They went their own way. They...families...they lived in closely knit communities, mostly relatives and they were sort of clannish. If you injured one, each of the others took it as a direct insult to him.

JS Like a feud?

AC Not to that extent but sort of in that way. They all spoke well of each other. You couldn't hardly get one to say anything bad about another one usually, as I said, they were relatives mostly. Like the community I was raised in, Pine Grove, my daddy's great-grandfather settled there around 1800-1810, his son was my dad's grandfather, and he raised my father. Nearly everybody in that community was related through this original Cottrill, the first one who moved there around 1800. And either by marriage or blood they were related.

JS Are the Cottrills and Jaggers related?

AC Only through marriage. Several instances of marriages.

JS We've heard the name Cottrell in association with the beginnings of the basket trade also.

AC No. If you did I don't think that it was correct. My dad's grandfather was a millwright and he was one who looked down on the basketmakers in fact he practically hated them.

JM Why, do you Know?

AC In his opinion they were shiftless, they were no account. They were like the rawhiders, instead of fixing something that was broken, they'd tie it up with rawhide.

(from this point tape not transcribed verbatim)
(Story that indicates baskets were being made as early as 1850's)

AC Dad's grandfather, he was a character, after he got older he became an alcoholic. He used to get drunk periodically and , while on one of his binges, he would sit around and get on a tirade about somebody he didn't like. He would talk about the basketmakers. He would say they had just about ruined all his young timber. He'd go out through the woods and see notches cut up trees, a chip took out ever so high. He said one of them must

AC have stood up on another's shoulders to cut them out. What they'd do, they'd go out through the woods and cut out a chip, and peel the fibres off to see if it'd split to make baskets, but i t would make a blemish on the tree.

JM Tell us a little about the peddlin trips.

AC Most of the stories concern Lige Thomas, he was the one most talked about. He was dad's cousin.

JM Tell us about how they started peddling, why they did it and where you think they went.

AC Whoever started the peddling had the makings of a pretty good businessman, the supply of baskets was there. They literally created a market too. It began, evidentally, after the railroad was built through Hart Co. I would guess that it began sometime after the Civil War. I doubt they travelled much before the Civil War.

JM When was the railroad built?

AC In the 1870's. If the basket peddling began with Uncle Ben, and then Elijah Thomas grew up, he was the oldest son.

JS Was that what he was called?

AC My dad called him E.T. All the people in the community called him Uncle Lige. He discovered you could make moned out of baskets and by about 1880 he had started into the store business at Roseburg, probably bought it from Uncle Ben , who was the first to have the store there. He probably bought the store for the sole purpose of taking in baskets in exchange for commodities. Of course, taking in baskets, he'd get a supply of them and he'd have to sell them and he began to make trips. Do you know how the basket frames for the wagons were made? Well you just used a regular old farm wagon with a big hay rack type of thing on it. You could haul a lot of baskets.

JS Was there another word for that wagon?

AC They just called it a basket frame for a farm wagon.

JS Did you ever hear the phrase road wagon?

AC Yeah it was a road wagon, just a typical farm wagon with a basket frame on it.

JM Do you know if anybody had a wagon that he used only for taking baskets on trips?

AC No, it doesn't seem logical. The farm wagon was the standard wagon. They fit bolsters, as they called them, on both axels to set a frame inside of. They made these basket frames to fit any

AC wagons. But since these basket peddlers didn't do much but peddle baskets, I suppose there were wagons solely used for peddling baskets.

JS Do you know of any of these wagons around now?

AC I douby that there's been one in years. I remember seeing one in my lifetime--Bob Childress, Lige's brother lived over in Grayson Co., had one sitting in fromt of the house. They had a little dog house of a thing built on the front of the wagon, waterproof, some covered with tin, some with tarp, I suppose, that they could sleep in in rainy weather and they kept their bedrolls, frying pan, coffee pot, whatever in that in the dry. They'd sit on the front of it.

(drawing)

The old farm wagon had high wheels in back and low wheels infront. The frame was made on two poles that were hewed out, they were about...they'd let the running gear out to make a long wheel-base and they'd put a long bed on it. There was a round or partly round pole on each side. They bored auger holes in it and they'd sit these poles in these auger holes. They didn't have to be heavy because a basket load was light. Across the top there was a split out piece. It was about 6' from the wagon bed to the top of the pole. They had enough of these upright pieces to keep the baskets from rolling out.

JM What was the wagon made of?

AC They would use light stuff, chestnut for these sills and then the floor was made of something light-- ½" poplar, weather boarding. The dog house in the front part. They could cover it up with baskets. They packed the baskets four in a bunch. They put the handles inside. They stuck together and they wove one split around to hold them togerher.

JM Did they use mules or horses to pull the wagon?

AC Nearly always mules.

JS We heard Lige Tom liked to use spring wagons.

AC You couldn't haul many baskets on a spring wagon. My father was a contemporary of Lige Tom. He said that when Lige first started he would ship maybe 1000 or so to a point like Fulton, Ky. or Hickman, Ky. and he would start out with a load of baskets on his wagon. If he got them sold by the time he got to Hickman, he would pick these others up at the freight depot and go on from there. He was organized.

JM How did he ship them down there?

Ac On the train.

JM Do you know the routes he took? How did he get from here to Hickman? Did he mention any towns?

AC I don't know for sure. My dad always told me Lige would take a sample to Illinois to the better farming communities, he would contract them. Then he would have them shipped out there on the train. Then he would hand deliver them around the neighborhood, or would rent a horse and buggy or spring wagon from a livery stable and haul them out.

JS Were people always glad to see Lijah Tom?

AC Yeah he was a character. I know nothing about him personally, but from all accounts he was very personable, had a brilliant personality. He never met a stranger. He loved people I guess, peaceable, quiet, but very talkative.

III B.1.
5.

JM How were the basket peddlers received in the communities that they went through? Where did they usually stay? What did they take with them?

AC If it was pretty weather, in the spring and the summer they prepared to camp out. If it was rainy or stormy, back in those days if you travelled, you could go to any farm house and they'd put you up for the night, feed your horses or mules. Most of them would, there'd be a few odd balls in a community. The poorer the farmhouse the apt you were to be taken in.

JM As far as you know then the basket peddlers were welcome in the communitie. What if they went to a larger town, like say Hopkinsville?

AC They would always camp outside of town preferable on a well-travelled exit out of town.

JM Why?

AC Well they could do better outside of town than inside a town. Most towns had some kind of city ordinance against peddlers.

JM They'd set up outside of town and trade their baskets there?

AC Yeah.

III B

JM Did you ever hear of any basket peddler who sold his baskets on those trips? Or did they always trade for goods?

AC They sold them.

JM Always?

AC Yeah, they didn't bring anything back with them except themselves, the wagon and mules, and money. That was the general rule. The reason they took them out of the community was to get money, they could get goods here.

JS Did you ever hear of people bringing back goods and setting up a stand or a store to get money?

AC I have heard stories of back in the old flatboat days on the Green River, that was a flourishing business.

(conversation about river unrelated to basketry)

AC The basket makers were primarily after the cash they could get for their produce. But knowing the kind of trader Lige Tom was, he probably traded for a lot of things.

JS Is there anybody that comes close to the kind of reputation that Lige Tom Has?

III B 3.

AC Not to my knowledge.

JS Are there any other family names, families that became known as peddlers?

IC

AC Yeah there were several. Of course Lige Tom was the king of the basket peddlers. He followed it all his life.

JS How long a time period is that? When did it begin and when did it end?

AC Assuming he began about 1880, I feel that's a reasonable date, and he died in 1945, He made a trip a few years before he died. That's a pretty long spread of time.

JM Do you know if he had particular contacts where he went? Do you know if he travelled a regular route?

AC He had contacts all over the midwest. I don't know of any regular route. In the early days lots of people went with Elijah. He took them as company or as partners.

JS Who were the other people who were peddlers?

AC Well, Gin Waddell, Willie's daddy, he was a character. He wrote a poem about the Jericho Church in Roseburg when they threw him out of the church for marrying grandma (see attached poem). He names most of the people in the community (reads poem). None of the family could read or write so they kept this poem alive by word of mouth. (conversation about history of poem)
(conversation about poem of "The Mule")(reads poem)
see attached poem

(more conversation about poem written about basketmakers)

AC Other famous basket peddlers were Jake Webb, Nimrod Jaggers, Felix Childress, Bob Childress, Sim Childress (all brothers of Lige Thomas). Some of the Guntermans, who were Lige Thomas'

AC nephews. Stamper Gunterman and his sons.

JM When the basket peddlers went on a peddling trip, how long would they be gone?

III B

AC The trips varied from 2-3 weeks to 6 weeks, not much longer than that. My daddy went on one trip. He and Ben Thompson, from Roseburg, bought 100-200 baskets, borrowed a basket frame, and left in the early spring. This was between 1905-10. They went through Butler Co., into Western Ky., and into Tennessee. They crossed Drake Creek somewhere down there, maybe Ft. Campbell area, and made a circle in Tennessee, moving south-southeast. Back up through Franklin, Ky. into Bowling Green, and then came home. They didn't sell all their baskets.

JM Why not?

AC Seemed there wasn't much of a demand for them down there. Lijah Thomas had told them they could sell all they could take down there.

JS Do you think the success of the basket trip had a lot to do with who the peddler was?

AC Yeah, a lot of it. I guess salesmanship has a lot to do with anything. I think Lijah Thomas was one of those people--a natural born salesman. Then too, he was a trader. He didn't trade only in baskets, he could trade in anything.

(end of side 4)

I C
III B 5.

AC Around the turn of the century, there are records to indicate thant Lige Tom traded even for land.
(general conversation about land conveyances)

V A B

JM What was the attitude of the basketmakers to that level of society that was probably below them--the freed slaves?

AC That weren't many slaves in this area. In about 1860 there were only about twelve black people between Munfordville and Wax. Most of these people despised slavery. They were poor people. They came mostly from North and South Carolina. Apparently Daniel Jaggers had a few slaves. A lot of them who had one or two slaves had them for social prestige.
(general discussion of slavery and religion unrelated to basketmaking)

JS Were there black people who made baskets?

AC I never heard of any. Never in my life.
(discussion of black people in area)

JM Do you know anything of the attitudes of the basketmakers to these black people?

AC No. There weren't many black people. (more discussion of local black people) (release of all material)

III B.2

AC Once when Lige Tom and Will Gunterman were on a trip, they came to a little town in Western Ky. or N.W. Tenn. They were waiting for the dew to fall that night to tighten all their baskets, when they became moist, when the dew fell, the sun would loosen the splits up and they wouldn't look so good. Early in the morning after the dew fell they would be tight. After they were hauling them for a week or two they began looking shabby. (story about young drunks). Lige didn't pretend to be sophisticated, he was just country.(story about Lige staying in farmers' house in Illinois and chewing and spitting tobacco)

JM What were some other tricks of the trade, like waiting for the dew?

III B.6

AC Another appeal they used in later years was to tell the people they'd better buy the baskets while they could because the white oak timber was about all gone. That wasn't much of a joke because it did get scarce. When my daddy and momma made baskets, we had to go all over the country to get timber--5 or 6 miles. That's a long way in a wagon.

JS What else did they say to try and create a demand?

AC I suppose the beggest sellers they had were the functional, or farm baskets, feed baskets. After they got to travellin in trucks where they could go up north--up to Illinois, Indiana and Ohio, they could sell the fancy baskets--flower baskets and stuff like that.

JS What are flower baskets?

III B.4

AC Oh they made all kinds of them. They made just plain vases.

JS Out of White oak?

AC Yeah.

III B.6

JS The same people who made bushel baskets?

AC No, this is in later years. Probably different people. But these were the later baskets.

JS In later years did the price of the basket start changing?

AC Yeah I don't know how much they'd bring.

III A

JS What do you mean by later years?

AC The 1920's and 30's. And they'd make wall baskets that would hang on a wall. I have no idea, I'd like to know when they started dying the color of the splits and what they used at first.

III 4 6

JS Do you remember anybody talking about dying the splits, or why they did it?

AC No.

JS Did they get more for them?

AC I suppose they did. There's more work in color splits.

JS How much more?

AC Five cints probably, maybe ten cents more. My mother made flower baskets, shopping baskets from 1'-2' wide and from 6" to ?..She even made purses. She found an outlet for hers at Brown Co., Indiana. A man who ran a curio shop, J.P. Besar, at Nashville, Ind. bought everything she made for many years--fifteen years.

IV A

III A.5

JM Was she considered to be a very good basket maker?

AC Of her type. Hers weren't really baskets. You think of the Ky. style then you think of what she made. She made novelties. She made fans. She would mail her baskets to Besar. He would go to Florida on vacations and sometimes he would send her an order from down there.

JM Do you remember your mother, or any other basketmakers, talking about whether they were treated fairly?

AC No, she didn't like to sell around the local stores because they were getting all the profit out of it. Selling to Besar, she could name her own price.

III A 5.

JS Did basketmakers ever sell from their own houses? Did they ever try to sell to people coming by?

AC Nobody but to Lige Thomas or Felix or somebody like that.

JS No tourists?

AC There were no roads, just an isolated community, just old wagon roads through the woods.

JS Are there any stories of things that weren't quite fair or baskets being stolen on the road?

AC Dad said Lige Thomas told him he never carried a gun on the trips. Said it would get you into more trouble than it could get you out of. He never was robbed, never lost a dime unless some of his partners stole it from him.

JM Do you know of any of that specifically?

AC No. People were different then. They held to the old customs.
(conversation about regional dialects)

JS Did you ever hear of any other terms for basket, or any short cut names the traders might have used?

AC No. I don't think so. (discussion of a piggin, a vessel and

AC a hogan, another type of vessel)

(discussion of disappeared trades)
(discussion of poverty and local farming methods) end side 5
(discussionof population shifts) start side 6
(discussion of black population shift)

end of interview 137